

Chapter 15

Columbus Announces His Discovery

(1493)
Christopher Columbus

1 **Introduction**

2 One of the most historically significant events of the last thousand years was Columbus's voyage
3 to the Western Hemisphere in 1492. Though he continued to insist that he had landed in Asia,
4 and even required the sailors on his third voyage to take an oath that they would never admit
5 otherwise, Columbus inadvertently made Europe aware of the presence of the Americas, which
6 to them was the New World. In the following letter, Columbus describes his journey to Luis de
7 Sant Angel, the Treasurer of Aragon who had supported his enterprise.

8 9 **Questions to Consider**

- 10 • What advantages accrued to Spain as a result of Columbus's voyage?
- 11 • Why did Columbus insist on giving everything a Spanish name?
- 12 • How did the inhabitants, the "Indians," fit into Columbus's plans?

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14
15 As I know you will be rejoiced at the glorious success that our Lord has given me in my voyage,
16 I write this to tell you how in thirty-three days I sailed to the Indies with the fleet that the
17 illustrious King and Queen, our Sovereigns, gave me, where I discovered a great many islands,
18 inhabited by numberless people; and of all I have taken possession for their Highnesses by
19 proclamation and display of the Royal Standard without opposition.

20
21 To the first island I discovered I gave the name of San Salvador, in commemoration of His
22 Divine Majesty, who has wonderfully granted all this. The Indians call it Guanaham. The second
23 I named the Island of Santa Maria de Concepcion; the third, Fernandina; the fourth, Isabella; the
24 fifth, Juana; and thus to each one I gave a new name. When I came to Juana, I followed the coast
25 of that isle toward the west and found it so extensive that I thought it might be the mainland, the
26 province of Cathay; and as I found no towns nor villages on the sea-coast, except a few small
27 settlements, where it was impossible to speak to the people, because they fled at once, I
28 continued the said route, thinking I could not fail to see some great cities or towns; and finding at
29 the end of many leagues that nothing new appeared, and that the coast led northward, contrary to
30 my wish, because the winter had already set in, I decided to make for the south, and as the wind
31 also was against my proceeding, I determined not to wait there longer, and turned back to a
32 certain harbor whence I sent two men to find out whether there was any king or large city. They
33 explored for three days, and found countless small communities and people, without number, but
34 with no kind of government, so they returned.

35
36 I heard from other Indians I had already taken that this land was an island, and thus followed the
37 eastern coast for one hundred and seven leagues, until I came to the end of it. From that point I
38 saw another isle to the eastward, at eighteen leagues' distance, to which I gave the name of

1 Hispaniola. I went thither and followed its northern coast to the east, as I had done in Juana, one
2 hundred and seventy-eight leagues eastward, as in Juana. This island, like all the others, is most
3 extensive. It has many ports along the sea-coast excelling any in Christendom - and many fine,
4 large, flowing rivers. The land there is elevated, with many mountains and peaks incomparably
5 higher than in the centre isle. They are most beautiful, of a thousand varied forms, accessible,
6 and full of trees of endless varieties, so high that they seem to touch the sky, and I have been told
7 that they never lose their foliage. I saw them as green and lovely as trees are in Spain in the
8 month of May. Some of them were covered with blossoms, some with fruit, and some in other
9 conditions, according to their kind. The nightingale and other small birds of a thousand kinds
10 were singing in the month of November when I was there. There were palm trees of six or eight
11 varieties, the graceful peculiarities of each one of them being worthy of admiration as are the
12 other trees, fruits and grasses. There are wonderful pine woods, and very extensive ranges of
13 meadow land. There is honey, and there are many kinds of birds, and a great variety of fruits.
14 Inland there are numerous mines of metals and innumerable people.

15
16 Hispaniola is a marvel. Its hills and mountains, fine plains and open country, are rich and fertile
17 for planting and for pasturage, and for building towns and villages. The seaports there are
18 incredibly fine, as also the magnificent rivers, most of which bear gold. The trees, fruits and
19 grasses differ widely from those in Juana. There are many spices and vast mines of gold and
20 other metals in this island. They have no iron, nor steel, nor weapons, nor are they fit for them,
21 because although they are well-made men of commanding stature, they appear extraordinarily
22 timid. The only arms they have are sticks of cane, cut when in seed, with a sharpened stick at the
23 end, and they are afraid to use these. Often I have sent two or three men ashore to some town to
24 converse with them, and the natives came out in great numbers, and as soon as they saw our men
25 arrive, fled without a moments delay although I protected them from all injury.

26
27 At every point where I landed, and succeeded in talking to them, I gave them some of everything
28 I had - cloth and many other things - without receiving anything in return, but they are a
29 hopelessly timid people. It is true that since they have gained more confidence and are losing this
30 fear, they are so unsuspicious and so generous with what they possess, that no one who had not
31 seen it would believe it. They never refuse anything that is asked for. They even offer it
32 themselves, and show so much love that they would give their very hearts. Whether it be
33 anything of great or small value, with any trifle of whatever kind, they are satisfied. I forbade
34 worthless things being given to them, such as bits of broken bowls, pieces of glass, and old
35 straps, although they were as much pleased to get them as if they were the finest jewels in the
36 world. One sailor was found to have got for a leather strap, gold of the weight of two and a half
37 castellanos, and others for even more worthless things much more; while for a new blancas they
38 would give all they had, were it two or three castellanos of pure gold or an arroba or two of spun
39 cotton. Even bits of the broken hoops of wine casks they accepted, and gave in return what they
40 had, like fools, and it seemed wrong to me. I forbade it, and gave a thousand good and pretty
41 things that I had to win their love, and to induce them to become Christians and to love and serve
42 their Highnesses and the whole Castilian nation, and help to get for us things they have in
43 abundance, which are necessary to us.

44
45 They have no religion, nor idolatry, except that they all believe power and goodness to be in
46 heaven. They firmly believed that I, with my ships and men, came from heaven and with this
47 idea I have been received everywhere since they lost fear of me. They are, however, far from
48 being ignorant. They are most ingenious men, and navigate these seas in a wonderful way, and

1 describe everything well, but they never before saw people wearing clothes nor vessels like ours.

2
3 Directly I reached the Indies in the first isle I discovered, I took by force some of the natives, that
4 from them we might gain some information of what there was in these parts; and so it was that
5 we immediately understood each other, either by words or signs. They are still with me and still
6 believe that I come from heaven. They were the first to declare this wherever I went, and the
7 others ran from house to house, and to the towns around, crying out, "Come! come! and see the
8 man from heaven!" Then all, both men and women, as soon as they were reassured about us,
9 came, both small and great, all bringing something to eat and to drink, which they presented with
10 marvellous kindness.

11
12 In these isles there are a great many canoes, something like rowing boats, of all sizes, and most
13 of them are larger than an eighteen-oared galley. They are not so broad, as they are made of a
14 single plank, but a galley could not keep up with them in rowing, because they go with incredible
15 speed, and with these they row about among all these islands, which are innumerable, and carry
16 on their commerce. I have seen some of these canoes with seventy and eighty men in them, and
17 each had an oar.

18
19 In all the islands I observed little difference in the appearance of the people, or in their habits and
20 language, except that they understand each other, which is remarkable. Therefore I hope that
21 their Highnesses will decide upon the conversion of these people to our holy faith, to which they
22 seem much inclined. I have already stated how I sailed one hundred and seven leagues along the
23 sea-coast of Juana, in a straight line from west to east. I can therefore assert that this island is
24 larger than England and Scotland together, since beyond these one hundred and seven leagues
25 there remained at the west point two provinces where I did not go, one of which they call Avan,
26 the home of men with tails. These provinces are computed to be fifty or sixty leagues in length,
27 as far as can be gathered from the Indians with me, who are acquainted with all these islands.

28
29 This other, Hispaniola, is larger in circumference than all Spain from Catalonia to Fuentarabia in
30 Biscay, since upon one of its four sides I sailed one hundred and eighty-eight leagues from west
31 to east. This is worth having, and must on no account be given up. I have taken possession of all
32 these islands, for their Highnesses, and all may be more extensive than I know, or can say, and I
33 hold them for their Highnesses, who can command them as absolutely as the kingdoms of
34 Castile. In Hispaniola, in the most convenient place, most accessible for the gold mines and all
35 commerce with the mainland on this side or with that of the great Khan, on the other, with which
36 there would be great trade and profit, I have taken possession of a large town, which I have
37 named the City of Navidad. I began fortifications there which should be completed by this time,
38 and I have left in it men enough to hold it, with arms, artillery, and provisions for more than a
39 year; and a boat with a master seaman skilled in the arts necessary to make others; I am so
40 friendly with the king of that country that he was proud to call me his brother and hold me as
41 such. Even should he change his mind and wish to quarrel with my men, neither he nor his
42 subjects know what arms are, nor wear clothes, as I have said. They are the most timid people in
43 the world, so that only the men remaining there could destroy the whole region, and run no risk if
44 they know how to behave themselves properly.

45
46 In all these islands the men seem to be satisfied with one wife, except they allow as many as
47 twenty to their chief or king. The women appear to me to work harder than the men, and so far as
48 I can hear they have nothing of their own, for I think I perceived that what one had others shared,

1 especially food. In the islands so far, I have found no monsters, as some expected, but, on the
2 contrary, they are people of very handsome appearance. They are not black as in Guinea, though
3 their hair is straight and coarse, as it does not grow where the sun's rays are too ardent. And in
4 truth the sun has extreme power here, since it is within twenty-six degrees of the equinoctial line.
5 In these islands there are mountains where the cold this winter was very severe, but the people
6 endure it from habit, and with the aid of the meat they eat with very hot spices.

8 As for monsters, I have found no trace of them except at the point in the second isle as one enters
9 the Indies, which is inhabited by a people considered in all the isles as most ferocious, who eat
10 human flesh. They possess many canoes, with which they overrun all the isles of India stealing
11 and seizing all they can. They are not worse looking than the others, except that they wear their
12 hair long like women, and use bows and arrows of the same cane, with a sharp stick at the end
13 for want of iron, of which they have none. They are ferocious compared to these other races, who
14 are extremely cowardly; but I only hear this from the others. They are said to make treaties of
15 marriage with the women in the first isle to be met with coming from Spain to the Indies, where
16 there are no men. These women have no feminine occupation, but use bows and arrows of cane
17 like those before mentioned, and cover and arm themselves with plates of copper, of which they
18 have a great quantity. Another island, I am told, is larger than Hispaniola, where the natives have
19 no hair, and where there is countless gold; and from them all I bring Indians to testify to this.

21 To speak, in conclusion, only of what has been done during this hurried voyage, their Highnesses
22 will see that I can give them as much gold as they desire if they will give me a little assistance,
23 spices, cotton, as much as their Highnesses may command to be shipped, and mastic as much as
24 their Highnesses choose to send for which until now has only been found in Greece, in the isle of
25 Chios, and the Signoria can get its own price for it; as much lign-aloe as they command to be
26 shipped, and as many slaves as they choose to send for, all heathens. I think I have found rhubarb
27 and cinnamon. Many other things of value will be discovered by the men I left behind me, as I
28 stayed nowhere when the wind allowed me to pursue my voyage, except in the City of Navidad,
29 which I left fortified and safe.

31 Indeed, I might have accomplished much more, had the crews served me as they ought to have
32 done. The eternal and almighty God, our Lord, it is Who gives to all who walk in His way,
33 victory over things apparently impossible, and in this case signally so, because although these
34 lands had been imagined and talked of before they were seen, most men listened incredulously to
35 what was thought to be but an idle tale. But our Redeemer has given victory to our most
36 illustrious King and Queen, and to their kingdoms rendered famous by this glorious event, at
37 which all Christendom should rejoice, celebrating it with great festivities and solemn
38 Thanksgivings to the Holy Trinity, with fervent prayers for the high distinction that will accrue
39 to them from turning so many peoples to our holy faith; and also from the temporal benefits that
40 not only Spain but all Christian nations will obtain. Thus I record what has happened in a brief
41 note written on board the Caravel, off the Canary Isles, on the 15th of February, 1493.

43 Yours to command,
44 The Admiral